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Abstract

Jeanne Delbaere interviewed Joy Kogawa in the Chateau de Colonster during the XIth Annual Conference on Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in German-speaking countries (Aachen-Liege, 16-19 June 1988).



Joy Kogawa was born Joy Nozonie Nokayama in Vancouver, BC on June 6, 1935, a third generation Canadian of Japanese ancestry. Her father was an Anglican minister. In 1942, she and her family became victims of the Canadian Government's policy of internment and dispersal of Japanese-Canadians in response to the Second World War. 'Some 21,000 people of Japanese ancestry - 17,000 of whom were naturalized or Canadian-born citizens - were uprooted from their west coast homes' in 1942. Kogawa, now divorced with two children, lives in Ontario.

Obasan, published in 1981, is part-autobiography, part-exorcism and part-fiction. It became a focus for the Japanese-Canadian community's demands for restitution and brought a half-forgotten history back into the light of public attention. It has won several major awards: the 1981 Books in Canada First Novel Award, the Canadian Author's Association 1982 Book of the Year Award, the Periodical Distributors Paperback Award, and several literary awards in the United States.

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Before Obasan appeared in 1981 you had written three volumes of poetry. The novel itself reads like a poem: did it grow out of your poetry?

I had been writing poetry since 1964. I had never thought of writing a novel. Poetry was for me a kind of discipline of dreams, a search for whatever it was that was being born within myself. Because the ideal seemed to be unattainable I looked for an avenue out of the struggle and that was an act of entering the landscape of poetry. All the answers that appeared out of the dreamworld were the language of poetry.

Does this mean that you were not aware of the political implications of your novel?

No, I wasn't. The writing of *Obasan* was very unconscious. I was doing what I always did with poetry, i.e. struggling with something. I was therefore not conscious of any political act. The political reality was the background rather than the foreground of my book. I struggled to free something that wanted to be free. It was a journey towards some accurate point which kept receding, a weariness of the search and at the same time a compulsion to continue.

Obasan does indeed give the impression of having been written out of a deep sense of personal compulsion but by splitting open the stone of silence (to use your beautiful image in the prologue), it also made audible the so far voiceless Japanese-Canadian community. With Obasan a whole piece of the Canadian mosaic was made visible.

None of this was conscious during the writing of the book. A character in it may have said this kind of thing but it was not part of my search. It was not even a personal quest. It was more like breathing, an act of life. Writing is so automatic for me that I cannot not write.

In the novel the narrator Naomi has two aunts: Obasan, the silent one and Emily, the speaker and warrior. Did you at the time identify with either of them?

Yes, I identified with the silent aunt. She was more who I was as a human being, struggling as I did myself with this silence.

Would you still identify with Obasan now?

I don't think so. I feel much closer to the speaker now, so much so that I might call my new book *Aunt Emily* but I haven't yet made up my mind. It will depend on the quality of her struggle.

Do I understand that your new book will be a sequence to Obasan?

Yes, the story of *Obasan* began in 1972, went back to the 1940s and then again to 1972. My new novel begins in 1983, moves back to the 1950s and finally returns, past 1983, to the present. Naomi is still the narrator. A problem that troubles me with her is that I have always wanted to move her out of her spinsterhood but this is not easy because she is such a repressed person.

From what you said about your present identification with Aunt Emily it is clear that the new book will also be more consciously political.

Yes, I now feel that to struggle is important. The Japanese-Canadian community is only one small pebble on the beach of human experience but there is a universal element in our struggling political endeavour. We feel some sort of solidarity with the world's communities in their effort to speak. That is why I find this conference so interesting. Many of the papers I have heard dealt with oppressed or marginalized cultures. We need to honour our struggle for mutuality and plurality and our efforts to overcome the dominations. Wilson Harris talked about that marvellously well this morning.

You feel that Canada will be a better country if ethnic differences are preserved?

I think so. When you have strong constituencies you have a stronger whole. Besides, there is more human richness when there is more diversity. Our Japanese-Canadian community was fairly strong before the war. There were about twenty-two thousand people along the West Coast. In Vancouver we had our own newspapers, our own commercial areas, our own hospital, etc. Now we no longer exist as a geographic community. The dispersal has worked and assimilation has become a fact. Our people have spread across the country; their properties were taken away from them and they never went home again. Much of our distinctive character

has been lost in the process, many of our specific values reified. But I do not think that what is vital for the soul has been lost. It is more that it has been transposed.

Could you mention one of these specific values?

Yes, tenderness towards the old, for instance. This was a cultural value from the East and it is tragic that it has very little corporate expression in the West and that is a great loss. But in the lives of individual Japanese families it still remains and of course tenderness will never be lost from the world. No matter how deeply it may be buried it will never be absent from the human condition and I believe that those who consciously keep it alive bring immeasurable power into the world.

Do you see a link between your political struggle to redress the wrongs of the Japanese-Canadians and your position as a Canadian woman writer?

I do. I came to the women's movement via the movements for minority rights and vice-versa. I feel that they feed each other because they are identical in so many ways. I see in the women's movement a great unifying force among cultures in conflict with one another, where there are real impasses like in Israel at the moment. Women can play a very positive role. One of the strongest hopes is in the women of the world becoming politically conscious and fighting with the women of other countries against oppression. There is a particular responsibility of women in oppressed cultures to educate women from oppressor cultures about the desperation of their plight and their need for the resources of the women's movement. There is also a responsibility for the women of the oppressor cultures to consciously and passionately don the role of the victimizer, however painful that may be, and to join in solidarity with their oppressed sisters. As a Canadian I have experienced both positions.

The narrator of Obasan also has this dual position, being a victim who is identified by her fellow Canadians as a victimizer.

You are right. This one-dimensional view of Japanese-Canadians resulted in their being severely victimized. Reality demands of all of us that we know the ways in which we are identified as both victims and victimizers. I think victimizers experience a one-dimensional identity of their own sense of victimization and therefore the corrective to this situation is for us all always to know we are both.

Don't you fear that your new political commitment might affect the quality of your writing?

It might. I have thought of it but it is what I am now and I cannot do anything against that. I now believe in the necessity of struggle. One is alive because one chooses to struggle.

What is interesting is that the process of becoming conscious came to you after Obasan was written.

Maybe it had been in me all the time but I didn't know it. The link between our unconscious and reality is mysterious. I'll tell you something that happened to me when I was writing *Naomi's Road*, a children's version of *Obasan* which I had been asked to do for Oxford University Press. Because it dealt with Naomi at a much younger age I had decided to expand on the friendship between her and Mitsi, a mean little girl mentioned only briefly in *Obasan*. The very day after I had written about the imaginary Mitsi I got a letter from the real one asking me whether I remembered her and giving me all sorts of details about her present life. The extraordinary thing was that almost all she said about herself in the letter had found its way into the chapter I had written the day before though I hadn't heard from her in over forty years.

To be a writer in Canada as in any other post-colonial society often involves a complicated process of appropriation and subversion of European literary models. This does not seem to have been your case.

No. Having had no university training I have never had a very strong sense of a tradition behind me. My reading has always been very sporadic. In a way I exist in a vacuum.

This may be the secret of your originality. Your voice is unique. It does not resemble anything we know. What about your links with Japan?

I feel strongly ambivalent towards things Japanese and also highly critical. My commitment is to Canada. My ties to Japan were severely destroyed by the experience of the Second World War. Being in Germany for this conference made me think a lot about the parallel between the Japanese history of war atrocities and Germany's struggle today with its past. Our corporate identity is built up of our stories and for us to be reconciled with the story of ourselves as evil requires an enormous courage, an almost superhuman effort towards reconciliation. We know we must not ever forget lest we repeat the evils of our ancestors, the evils of our grandparents perhaps - their lethargy, their blindness, their false innocence and in many cases their barbarism. To embrace that and to demand of ourselves a refusal to repeat that history is a great calling.